



The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Bereshit

Parshat Bereshit

Tishrei 5782 / October 2021

Welcome to the 2nd cycle of The Collective Conversation!

Our Rabbis will begin this season of divrei Torah with essays on Parshat Bereshit and Noach. We will continue with **your** divrei Torah for the rest of the year.

Rabbi Reuven Fink of the Young Israel of New Rochelle will launch the cycle with an overview of Sefer Bereshit delivered on Zoom on Wednesday, October 6 at 8 PM.

Learning From Kayin's Mistaken Approach to the World

By Rabbi Nuriel Klinger

Before *Kayin* murdered his brother *Hevel*, both of them brought gifts to God, and God accepted *Hevel's* offering while not turning towards *Kayin's*. *Kayin* is very angry that God did not turn to his offering and the Torah describes, וַיִּפֹּל פָּנָיו, that *his face fell*. Presumably, he was very distraught that God did not accept his offering. But then something strange happens, God says to *Kayin*, לָמָּה חָרָה לְךָ, וְלָמָּה נָפְלוּ פָנֶיךָ, *Why are you distressed and why is your face fallen?* הֲלוֹא אָם-תִּיטִיב, שְׂאֵת, וְאִם לֹא תִיטִיב, לְפָתַח חַטָּאת רֹבֵץ; וְאֵלֶיךָ, תְּשׁוּקָתוֹ, וְאַתָּה, תִּמְשָׁל-בּוֹ *Surely, if you do right there is uplift. But if you do not do right sin couches at the door; its urge is toward you, yet you can be its master.*

God lectures *Kayin*: if you improve and turn things around, then all will be good, but if not, sin is crouching at your door, and you, *Kayin*, will have made a terrible mistake. What is unclear from the story is just what *Kayin* did wrong to this point, what was wrong with his offering? Why does God see a need for *Kayin* to improve, especially since it was *Kayin* who was the first person ever to bring an offering to God?

We can work with what we know about *Kayin* and *Hevel* from the Torah to understand why God reacts as he does. Looking carefully at the verses, we see that *Kayin* represents a self-centered mentality — the world revolves around him. After murdering his brother, he responds to God, הֲשֹׁמֵר אָחִי אֲנִי, *Am I my brother's keeper?* Apparently, it didn't occur to him until that moment that other people and their welfare should matter to him.

What's more, this whole section of the Torah is written with a heavy focus on *Kayin*. We are told the reason for *Kayin's* name followed by, וַתִּסַּף לְלֶדֶת, אֶת-אָחִיו אֶת-הָבֶל, *Chava gave birth to his brother*, and then, almost as an aside, whose name

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happens to be *Hevel*. Names in the Torah are important and perhaps the name of *Chava's* oldest symbolizes how he views the world. *Kayin's* name means to acquire — his world view is how do I acquire something good for myself. If I give a gift to God, he might muse, will it be good for me, will I get something in return. To *Kayin*, *Hevel* is as his name suggests, a waste and not worthy of his care. *Hevel* is a waste of space, and *Kayin* kills *Hevel* because he literally sees no value in *Hevel* to himself.

Perhaps there was nothing particularly objectionable about *Kayin's* offering, yet וְאֵל-קָיִן וְאֵל-הֶוֶלֶתוֹ לֹא שָׁעָה, *to Kayin and to his offering, God paid no heed*. Note that God paid no heed to *Kayin* before he paid no heed to his offering. God doesn't accept *Kayin's* offering because of who *Kayin* was to that point in his life. The focus in that verse seems to be that God has a problem with *Kayin*, and that is why He has a problem with his offering. This is why God lectures *Kayin*. If you change your attitude and see value in other human beings — in your brother — it will be good. You can learn from him, take pleasure in taking care of him, and create a meaningful and rewarding relationship for both of you. However, if you take your current approach, no doubt that you will engage in terrible sins.

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Modern Orthodoxy sometimes touts itself as a strictly Orthodox movement that is open to the ideas and thinking of the outside world. Many say that we look at what the world has to offer, and we take from the world what fits and is not in conflict with our values.

But that in and of itself is essentially what *Kayin* did. This approach is that the world is created for us; we are the focus, so we are happy to take from the world. It's an approach that God may not turn towards. Of course, we should be open to ideas and thinking that come from outside the Jewish community. And, importantly, we must also focus on contributing to the world, not simply because we need to earn a living, but also with the attitude that it is our duty and responsibility as a part of the world community that God created to contribute to the success of that world. Things outside the Jewish community should matter to us as well. Caring and contributing to the rest of the world is not *Hevel*, a waste. Let's remember not to say לֹא יָדַעְתִּי אֲנִי אֶחָיוּ אֶנְכִּי. *I didn't know I am my brother's keeper*. Let us each, in our own way, contribute and ensure the success of the world community and truly be a light unto the nations.

Nuri and Aliza Klinger arrived in Scarsdale in 2015 and have enjoyed every moment living in the YIS community. In addition to his role as Associate Rabbi at YIS, Nuri is the Rabbi in Residence at WDS and taught at Ramaz for five years. Nuri loves studying Torah, reading about history, and anything to do with sports.

*Want to write or dedicate a Parsha essay?
Please contact Steve Smith at stevenjsmith@yahoo.com*

The Collective Conversation is a project of the Young Israel of Scarsdale and the YIS Living Torah Fund
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